

MEMORIAL AND RESOLUTIONS

OF THE

LEGISLATURE OF MASSACHUSETTS,

IN FAVOR OF

A reduction of the rates of postage.

MAY 17, 1848.

Ordered to be printed.

To the honorable the Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled:

The memorial of the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts represents:

That believing the original design in the establishment of the Post Office Department was not to increase the revenues of the general government; but, by furnishing greater facilities for correspondence by letters and otherwise, to advance the interests of commerce, trade, manufactures, the arts and sciences, and thereby promote the pecuniary, the intellectual, and moral welfare of the whole people:

Believing, also, that the result of the experiment, already made by our government in the reduction of letter postage, is such as to warrant the belief that a still further reduction may be made without endangering the revenue, and that the voice of the people of this Commonwealth demands such reduction, even, if need be, at the expense of the revenue: Your memorialists submit the following considerations:

First. As it was not originally intended to make the Post Office Department a source of revenue to the government, the rates of postage should at least be so far reduced as only to enable the department to meet its current expenses.

Our system of postage was copied essentially from that of the English government. In the statute of 12th Charles II, it is distinctly laid down that the object of the post office establishment was to afford advantages to *trade and commerce.*

It was anticipated that it would effectually subserve the ends of government, contribute to "the advancement of trade, commerce, manufactures, and the arts, the diffusion of knowledge, and the progress of general improvement, and thus permanently increase the revenues of the government."

Besides this incidental advantage, which proved far greater than was anticipated, the department became a source of very considerable revenue.

Tippin & Streeper, printers.

From £10,000 in 1653, the net revenue amounted in 1840 to £1,649,088.

In the progress of the discussion in Parliament in 1839, on the subject of postage reform, we find the following among other sentiments relating to revenue from postage:

Mr. O'Connell said: "All the government should have required was to be indemnified against the expenses of the post office. If the postage on letters was not sufficient for that, government ought to make a sacrifice for the purpose of facilitating communication."

Mr. Warberton stated that "the post office was established not as a branch of the revenue, but for the advantage of trade and commerce."

Further, "the advantage of post office communications ought to be accessible to the whole community, and ought not to be made matter of taxation at all."

Dr. Lardner said: "I look upon the post office revenue to be a most iniquitous tax upon the affections, the morals, upon every social good, and upon everything that is desirable among a people in a state of progressive civilization. It is a tax on knowledge, a tax on science, and a tax on literature."

Lord Ashburton said: "I think few if any taxes have so injurious a tendency as the tax upon communication by letter; it is, in fact, taxing the conversation of the people who live at a distance from each other."

These sentiments your memorialists believe to be equally applicable to the system under our own government.

Furthermore, they know of no valid reason why the Post Office Department should be required to sustain itself, any more than any other department of the government. The constitution gives to Congress power "to establish post offices and post roads," leaving the extent to which the system shall be carried, and the means by which it shall be sustained, entirely to their discretion.

Admitting that the government ought not to be taxed for letter communication, it does by no means follow that all the expenses of the Post Office Department, so called, should be imposed upon letter-postage.

The *franking privilege*, designed to aid the officers of government in discharge of their respective duties in connexion with the various departments, has far less necessary connexion with the Post Office than with the treasury, the army, or the navy. The same may be said of other burdens which have been imposed upon letter-postage.

From the last report of the Postmaster General, it appears that more than *five millions* of letters have passed through the mails, during the last year, which have brought no income to the department. At six and a quarter cents, probably about the average rate of letter-postage, the amount of loss sustained by the department, or, allowing this sum to be the actual cost of transmission, the amount of tax imposed upon letter-postage, to promote the general interests of the government, was \$312,500. To this is to be added the public documents with which the mails are burdened, constituting a very large portion of the mail matter on all routes; also, the expense of mailing and transmitting nearly two millions of letters which find their way into the dead-letter office, amounting, in all, to at least *one million* of dollars annually, assessed upon letter-postage.

Among the effects of high rates of postage are the following, viz:

1. It interferes with the physical, intellectual, and moral improvement of all classes.

2. It throws obstacles in the way of trade and commerce, and thus injures the national prosperity.

3. It retards the progress of the arts and sciences, and paralyzes the hands of the educator.

4. It circumscribes the operations of the benevolent and the humane, and thus injures the poor and the needy.

5. It imposes grievous burdens upon the learned professions, and prevents that free interchange of thought which progress in the arts, literature, morals, and religion, and the general good of society, demand.

6. It leads to frequent and most extensive violations of the statutes for the protection of the Post Office revenue, and thus impairs respect for the laws.

The result of the experiment, already made by our government, in the partial reduction of the rates of postage, warrants the belief that a still further reduction may be made, without endangering the revenue, and with like beneficial results to the whole people.

The Postmaster General, in his last annual report, speaking of this experiment, says: "It is gratifying to find that, within so short a period after the great reduction of the rates of postage, the revenues of the department have increased much beyond the expectations of the friends of the cheap-postage system, while the expenditures for the same time have diminished more than half a million of dollars annually, and that the department is in a condition to sustain itself, without further aid from the treasury."

From the same document, we learn that the whole number of letters which passed through the mails during the year ending June 30, 1847, was - - - - - 52,173,480

The whole number of newspapers	-	-	-	-	55,000,000
" " pamphlets and magazines	-	-	-	-	2,000,000
" " dead letters	-	-	-	-	1,800,000
" " franked letters	-	-	-	-	5,000,000

The revenue of the department	-	-	-	\$3,880,337 76
Of this sum was derived from letter-postage	-	-	-	3,188,957 43

Leaving but - - - - -	\$691,380 33
for all the other resources of the department.	

The same officer estimates the revenue for the current year at \$4,313,157, which will exceed the expenses of the department the last year \$333,587, and the average expenses for the nine years next preceding the reduction by the sum of \$51,407 65.

From these facts we infer—

1. That a further reduction may be made in the revenues of the department without endangering the national treasury.

If it be the settled policy of the government that the Post Office shall be sustained by its own resources, it ought not, certainly, to be required to pay into the public treasury annually the sum of \$333,587, in addition to at least \$312,500 in the way of franked letters, and \$200,000 more in the transportation of franked public documents, and \$125,000 more for dead letters, making in all nearly one million of dollars, which the department is now taxed for the special benefit of the general government.

2. That reducing the rates of postage tends to increase the revenues of the department, while it reduces the expenditures.

The estimated revenue of the current year exceeds the average annual revenue of the nine years next preceding the reduction, by \$51,407 65, while the expenditures of the year ending June 30, 1847, are less than the annual average of the nine years next preceding the reduction, by \$520,022.

3. That the franking privilege is as essentially a tax upon letter-postage for the benefit of the general government, as it would be, were the same amount of money derived from letter-postage put into the public treasury, to be used for public purposes.

4. That letter postage, which we think should bear no burdens but its own, is now taxed, 1. For the transmission of letters and public documents, franked by public officers, for the benefit of the general government. 2. For the transmission of newspapers and pamphlets, the postage of which defrays but a moiety of the expense they impose upon the department. 3. The expense of maintaining mail routes in new and sparsely peopled territories. With as much propriety might the expenses of military posts, in those regions, be made chargeable upon the Post Office Department, as that of sustaining post offices and transmitting mail bags to letter-postage.

The results of the experiment now being made in Great Britain, as far as developed, are still more conclusive in favor of cheap postage.

Their present system of postage, which owes its paternity to Rowland Hill, went into operation in 1840. The rates of postage there corresponded very nearly to those of our government before the reduction made in 1845. They were at once reduced to a uniform rate of *one penny* for all printed and written letters weighing not more than half an ounce; on all pamphlets and magazines, letter-postage for every half ounce; all newspapers, printed on stamped paper, to go free. The charge to be the same for all distances, and in all cases doubled if not prepaid. The franking privilege was abolished, and provision made for the transmission of money in sums not exceeding *five pounds*.

As was anticipated, a great reduction took place in the receipts of the Post Office Department.

The net proceeds for 1839 was £1,544,224. The average net proceeds for the twelve years next preceding, was £1,577,520. But from 1815 to 1835, a period of twenty years, the net postage revenue had diminished £17,000; while the revenue from stage-coaches had increased 128 per cent., and that too while, in population, wealth, manufactures, commerce, arts, the sciences and general intelligence, the nation was progressing faster than for the like time in any other portion of its history.

In 1841 the net receipts of the department were only - £495,914
Showing a loss, from 1840, of - - - - 1,153,174

Or nearly six millions of dollars.

In Ireland the expense of management exceeded the receipts - 19,670
But, in 1846, the net receipts of the department amounted to - 760,588
Showing an average annual increase, from the commence-
ment of the reform, of - - - - 44,112

And a difference between the receipts of 1840 and 1846 of - 264,674

It is worthy of remark, that, under the new law, the receipts for newspaper postage are enumerated under the head of stamps, and enter not among the resources of the Post Office Department.

But there is another aspect of this subject. In 1839 the whole number of letters which passed through the mails was but 99,000,000.

In 1840, the first year of the reduction, it amounted to 192,000,000—nearly double.

In 1845 the number was 329,161,511—an increase, in six years, of 234 per cent. Of this number, 271,904,646 passed through the offices of England proper, 28,669,169 through those of Scotland, and 28,587,996 through those of Ireland; while not more than fifty-three millions passed through the offices of the United States, with a population little less than that of England, Scotland, and Ireland, combined, and with a greater proportion of readers and writers than any other people on the globe; a people, too, who print and read more than half the newspapers that are published.

This disparity is obviously attributable to two causes:

1. The increased facilities for communication by letter, have caused a much more frequent and more general intercourse through this medium.

2. All inducements to evade the laws and defraud the revenue being removed, most of the letters which are written find their way into the mails.

We further infer, that a system of postage which has operated so beneficially in England, affording greatly increased facilities to commerce, trade, manufactures, literary and benevolent operations, and, through these, securing a permanent augmentation of the revenues of the government, would be productive of like benefits, and might, with entire safety, be adopted in our own government.

From these considerations, your memorialists are induced to submit the following outline of a plan for further reducing the rates of postage:

1. That the *rate* of postage on letters, newspapers, and all printed documents, be uniform, irrespective of distance.

2. That the postage on all written or printed letters be *two cents* per half-ounce.

3. That the postage of newspapers be *one cent*, in all cases to be prepaid.

4. That for all pamphlets, magazines, and other printed documents, letter-postage be charged for every half-ounce.

5. In all cases, the rates to be doubled if not prepaid.

6. The franking privilege to be confined to business connected with the Post Office.

The difference in expense between transporting a letter five miles and five hundred miles, is so small as scarcely to be appreciable. A barrel of flour may be freighted from Albany to Boston for *forty* cents. At that rate, 160 half-ounce letters may be carried two hundred miles for one cent.

On all the mail routes, the mails are to be transported, whether there be few or many letters. If a letter be mailed at Boston, we conceive that it can make no difference with the carriers whether the letter is stopped at New York, or continues on to Washington or New Orleans, except it be the increase of weight, which, as we have seen, is so near infinitesimal as to be inappreciable.

Furthermore, the letter which has travelled but one hundred miles may perform as essential service to the recipient as that which has been carried one thousand miles; and, if the expense to the department is the same in both cases, we know not why one should pay more than the other.

Hence we are of opinion, that in estimating the expense of transmitting mail matter, distance is not an essential element.

In recommending so great a change as from an average of six and a quarter cents down to an English penny, or, what is nearly its equivalent, *two cents*, we are well aware that we shall awaken fears, lest the Post Office Department become burdensome to the general government.

But the evils we would remove, we apprehend, cannot be reached by milder means. To afford material and permanent relief, the reduction must be so great as at once to cut off all competition in the way of private conveyances, remove every temptation to defraud the revenue, and furnish all reasonable facilities for free letter communication.

This we feel confident will be effected by reducing the postage, at once, to the minimum rate.

The reasons urged in the British Parliament for this rate, we think are equally applicable here.

While the subject of postage reform was under discussion, Francis Baring, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, said, "I find the whole of the evidence, the whole of the authorities, conclusively bearing in favor of *penny postage*."

"I conscientiously believe," he adds, "that the public run less risk of loss in adopting the proposition for a *penny postage*, than it would if we introduced a *two-penny postage*."

Mr. Goulburn, then leader of the opposition, said: "After reading the evidence, it was with no little surprise he found the committee proposing a postage of *two pence*, instead of *one penny*; for the whole evidence went to show, that a postage of *two pence* would fail, but a *penny* might succeed."

Mr. O'Connell heartily supported the reduction, and thought "'twould be one of the most valuable legislative reliefs that had ever been given to the people of his country since he had had a seat in Parliament."

From the report of the Postmaster General, it appears that the average rate of letter-postage, under our present system, is a fraction over six cents.

An increase of two hundred per cent. over the number, for the year ending June 30, 1847, would give 159,000,000 of letters, which, allowing the expenditures to be no greater, would give, at the rate of *two cents*, a revenue nearly equal to that of the last year.

In England, the increase was 234 per cent. in six years. Allowing as great an increase here (and why should there not be a much greater?) in 1853, the number of letters would amount to 175,000,000. This number, at two cents each, would yield a revenue of three millions and a half of dollars; a sum exceeding the receipts of the department, the last year, for letter-postage, by \$311,043. Add to this \$100,000, the proceeds of five millions of letters now franked, together with \$40,000, the postage of two millions of dead letters—also the receipts from newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines, which would doubtless be much greater than under the present system, (the whole number of newspapers reported as passing through the mails last year is but fifty-five millions, while from Boston alone more than thirty millions were issued)—and a sum would be produced, which, it would seem, ought to quiet the fears of the most timid.

And when there is superadded the incidental but no less certain beneficial results of cheap postage—the greatly increased facilities secured to every branch of industry, and the consequent augmentation of the general revenue, new life and energy to all reformatory, educational, and benevolent movements, the speedy and general diffusion of information upon all

subjects calculated to improve the condition of society, and diffuse the principles of republican freedom, and give permanency to our institutions—your memorialists, with confidence, most respectfully ask for the subject of their memorial the candid consideration of your honorable bodies.

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

May 1, 1848.

The committee to whom was referred the memorial on postage, together with the order appended by the Senate, have considered the same, and report:

That, in their judgment, the object aimed at will best be gained by so amending the language of the memorial that it shall take the form of a report, and that there be appended to the same the accompanying resolve.

By order of the committee.

R. W. HUBBARD.

RESOLVES on reduction in the rates of postage.

Resolved, That the result of the partial reduction made by the general government in the rates of postage, together with the success of the postage reform in England, warrant the belief that a still further reduction and a uniform rate of postage would greatly conduce to the general diffusion of knowledge, and may be made without endangering the revenue of the Post Office Department.

Resolved, That the foregoing report, together with the accompanying resolves, be forwarded to our Senators and Representatives in Congress, and that they be requested to use their influence to secure the passage of such a law as is contemplated in said report, or such modification of the existing laws relating to postage as, in their judgment, will promote the best interests of the whole community.

House of Representatives, May 10, 1848.—Passed.

FRANCIS B. CROWNINSHIELD, *Speaker*.

In Senate, May 10, 1848.—Passed.

ZENO SCUDDER, *President*.

May 10, 1848.—Approved.

GEO. N. BRIGGS.

Secretary's office, May 11, 1848. A true copy.—Attest:

W. B. CALHOUN, *Secretary*.

